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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001403

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/31/2016

TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM ASEC AG

SUBJECT: ALI BELHADJ PROTESTS U.S. ACTIONS IN LEBANON IN
FRONT OF THE EMBASSY

REF: A. ALGIERS 662

1B. ALGIERS 565

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) In a deliberate challenge to the authority of the GOA, which released him from prison March 6 under the terms of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, co-founder of the now banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) Ali Belhadj demonstrated in front of Embassy Algiers July 31, carrying two Arabic-language placards. One placard called on the GOA to close down the Embassy over U.S. policy in Lebanon; the other called on the GOA to close Algerian oil fields to Americans for the same reason.

12. (U) Embassy security personnel observed a driver dropping off Belhadj in front of the Embassy around 1620 local time (1120 EDT). Belhadj exited the vehicle and, unaccompanied, protested in front of the consular pedestrian entrance to the Embassy. Algerian police approached Belhadj as soon as his protest began and radioed for instructions. His protest ended when three police officers arrived 15-20 minutes later in an unmarked police vehicle and -- following a two-minute discussion -- persuaded him to enter their vehicle peacefully and leave the site at approximately 1645 local time (1145 EDT). Although no media were present, many Algerians passing the Embassy on their way home from work observed Belhadj's protest, and word will undoubtedly spread of Belhadj's action. Under the terms of the release of Belhadj -- and fellow extremists -- from jail (reftels), he is prohibited from all political activity. (Note: Police officials told RSO personnel that Belhadj would be given a warning and released the same evening. Police assigned to the Embassy have also been instructed by their superiors to interdict immediately any person attempting to protest, according to these same sources. End Note.)

13. (C) COMMENT: Belhadj's bold protest in clear defiance of guidance given to him by GOA officials, according to our conversations with them, was clearly provocative. He has challenged the GOA to arrest him and return him to prison on an issue -- Israeli military operations in Lebanon -- that strongly resonates with Algerians from all walks of life. Any GOA move to punish Belhadj for his protest would undoubtedly be unpopular. The GOA must now choose between holding Belhadj to the terms of Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation by returning him to jail for defying previous warnings and turning a blind eye to his protest to avoid inflaming public opinion.

DAUGHTON